

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ROSSINI'S COMPOSITIONS.---NO. II.

We have thus far endeavoured to trace those predominant features of attraction which, like a magic charm, appeared to us to have imparted to the compositions of Rossini a degree of universal popularity never before experienced by the works of any other musical writer. His melodies are not only relished over the whole extent of civilized Christendom, but, strange, to tell, they have even found their way to the barbarian ears of Mussulmans. We find from recent reports that the military band of the body-guard of Sultan Mahmoud has been taught to pipe, *a la Turque* it is true, but with tolerable success, some of the most favorite airs and marches of Rossini, and that his Highness is delighted with the performance. The most enthusiastic admirers of the musical idol of the present day, will readily acknowledge that we have not been backward in rendering full justice to his merits; we have not hesitated in pronouncing him an extraordinary musical genius, whose works, in our opinion, really deserve the popularity which they have acquired.

This picture, however, has its shady side. The works of Rossini, amidst all their charms, present certain points, which, though they cannot silence our admiration of his genius, yet compel us to blend our praise with some expressions of critical animadversion. If these defects were casual and solitary, a conviction of the imperfection of all human productions would induce us to pass them by unnoticed; but they seem to adhere, more or less, to all his works; they have furnished his adversaries with weapons to combat his fame. Impartiality, therefore, and a view to the interests of the art, call upon us to investigate these blemishes, however slight some of them may be, and to point them out with candour, as beacons to the artists of the present and future generations.

Mannerism is one of the most frequent reproaches with which Rossini is assailed by his enemies; and as the charge in our opinion is not altogether unfounded, we feel in some measure called upon to elucidate its nature and import.

By the term "mannerism," we do not exactly understand that degree of manifestation of individuality which is inseparable from all human efforts, and which, if not carried to excess, so as to render the individual apparently a slave to it, even sheds a charm over them. This unobjectionable, nay, pleasing individuality of conception, expression, and treatment of a subject, prevails, more or less, in the productions of the greatest masters in painting and sculpture, and is generally sufficiently striking to proclaim the author to an experienced eye. The connoisseur finds no difficulty in deciding whether such a picture be the production of Raphael, Titian, or Correggio; and he will, with nearly equal facility, recognise the chisel of Michel Angelo, Canova, Thorwaldsen, or Chantrey. In the same manner will a certain peculiarity of thought and style proclaim the writing of Thucydides, Tacitus, Cicero, Voltaire, Gibbon, Dr. Johnson, &c.; and similar characteristic features, though perhaps less decisively marked, have, more or less, distinguished the works of classic composers, such as Beethoven, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Cimarosa, Paesielo, &c. These distinctive characteristics, however, apply rather to the substance of a production, than to its form and manner; and hence the term "mannerism" appears to have been very properly devised to designate striking peculiarities of form and manner in the expression of our ideas, feelings, or conceptions, or in any of our intellectual productions. Since it is the frequent recurrence of these peculiarities that renders them striking, repetition and sameness, at least in form and mode, seem to be essential criteria of mannerism.

In this respect, it would be difficult to meet the opponents of Rossini with any chance of success. A sameness of style and manner in his works strikes the most superficial observer. Rossini, more than any composer we know, is, as it were, a slave to a peculiar style and manner, by which his compositions may be instantly known. This style, however, some of the peculiarities of which will be briefly noticed presently, cannot be said to be altogether of Rossini's own creation: much of it may be traced in the works of Generali, from whom the former is stated to have had lessons in composition. In Generali's "Adelina," we remember to have plainly recognised the prototype, or the germ of many of Rossini's peculiarities. From Velluti, also, he has borrowed largely, as regards style and manner; and he has made good use of these loans; principally, of course, in vocal compositions, but not in these alone: many of Velluti's modes of embellishment and diction have even been engrafted upon the instrumental scores of

Rossini. All these ideas and hints, derived from the works of others, Rossini certainly has more fully developed, carried to a greater length, and embodied in a sort of systematic aggregate of style, which, thus appropriated and embodied, is generally considered as a style of his own; at the same time, we ought not to be altogether unmindful of the changes of style and manner which, under any circumstances, mere lapse of time has at all periods effected in music. If Rossini had not existed, some such change would have taken place; and though the aggregate of the style of the present day might not be precisely that which Rossini, no doubt, has principally been instrumental in establishing; and though the change might, probably, not have been so speedy, striking, and universal, it is a question whether, without Rossini, we might not at this moment possess a style of music, less pronounced perhaps, but substantially similar to that of the *Gran Maestro*. Indeed, what has rendered his style so strongly marked and striking, is the constant repetition of the same formulas and modes of diction. Persons that are in the habit of making use of particular phrases, or modes of expression, soon attract our attention, and become conspicuous in society.

To enumerate all the features of individual mannerism in Rossini's music, would lead us to an analysis much too scientific for the general reader: we therefore confine our remarks to some of the most prominent, which will be quite sufficient for our purpose.

The *Crescendos* form a powerful and favourite engine of effect in Rossini's compositions. They make their appearance as regularly and invariably in his overtures and finales as horse-radish with a joint of roast beef. Some simple phrase, of four bars or so, founded on an alteration of the tonic and dominant harmonies, is selected to serve as a peg to hang on the darling crescendo; and nothing remains but to ring the changes on the passage in question, taking care to let the instrument step in successively, and to augment the bustle in gradation, by increasing not only the momentum of sound, but also the number and speed of the notes. This family-recipe for preparing the Rossinian crescendo we can confidently recommend as infallible, and such as the master himself invariably employs in its confection. We well remember the gratification with which we heard the first specimen. It was in the overture which, at the King's Theatre, serves as the introduction to the "*Barbiere di Siviglia*." But, as is the case in every thing else, constant repetition has sickened us of this species of musical seasoning, which, moreover, is by no means an original idea. We meet with crescendos, quite similar in form, in works of an earlier date than the operas of Rossini, especially in the scores of Generali and Paer. But these masters, in their primitive timidity, contented themselves with a few modest bars of the kind, while Rossini, the autocrat of crotchets and quavers, taking it for granted that his audience will thankfully receive what he judges to be fit and meet, has had the boldness to dispense these crescendos wholesale. They seldom measure less than three or four yards of staves in any of his overtures.

To the excessive use of triplets in the music of Rossini we have already had occasion to advert, as one of the causes which contribute to the fascinating liveliness and animation of his compositions; and we at the same time felt no hesitation in stating our opinion concerning the two frequent employment and abuse of this favorite rhythmic figure. It is this abuse—carried, as we find it, to great excess, and often resorted to in movements or periods where triplets are totally out of their place—which constitutes another and most palpable point of Rossinian mannerism.

A remarkable predilection for *Appoggiaturas* forms a further and very characteristic feature in the works of Rossini. There are, probably, few of our readers, musical or unmusical, that will be found quite strangers to this technical term, which, from its literal import, might fitly be translated "*leaning-notes*." If, instead of intoning at once the essentially harmonic note of a melody, we introduce the note by previously *leaning* upon another, above or below it, that introductory note, which retards the appearance of the essential harmonic sound, is called an appoggiatura. The most natural "*leaning-notes*" are those which lie next to the harmonic note, and belong to the scale of the key of the melody itself. Thus, in the key of C, *b* or *d* will serve as natural appoggiaturas to *c*; as *bc* or *dc*. Other notes, however, quite foreign to the key, are resorted to for this purpose. Thus, in the last-mentioned instance, *dc*, instead of employing *d* as appoggiatura, *d flat* might be used in certain cases. In so far Rossini has done like others before him: but whilst it had been customary not to suffer the duration of the appoggiatura to exceed that of the main sound, and indeed frequently to make it shorter, Rossini's appoggiaturas are often much longer than the harmonic note itself. This retardation of the latter naturally imparts a certain degree of piquancy to the melody, and its effect is further rendered striking by the legitimate harmony of the melodic note being at once, and in anticipation, assigned to this lengthened appoggiatura; thus producing a temporary dissonance, the peculiarity of which naturally acts as a stimulant to the ear. But it is not alone by lengthening the leaning-note that Rossini is fond of delaying the appearance of the plain melodic sound. Instead of merely applying for support to the next-door neighbour, he scruples not to go a few houses higher up; like Moses in the School for Scandal, whose friend has not the money, but the friend has a friend, &c. To speak plainly, Rossini builds up appoggiatura upon appoggiatura; instead of introducing C in a homely manner, by means of its next upper neighbour *d*; *d* has need of being ushered in by its own neighbour *e*; not unfrequently *e* obtains the same friendly office at the hands of *f*; and, as if to play with our patience, this latter usher of ushers is unconscionably lengthened into the bargain, while all the while the harmony properly appertaining to C has prepared us for its debut; like a Lord Mayor's procession, in which various sets of official personages successively precede, until at last the main object of the show, the grand civic car, makes its appearance.

This is not the place to illustrate by crotchets and quavers the Rossinian process of piling up appoggiaturas. Enough has been said to convey some idea of the proceeding; nor shall we detain the reader by any remarks on the variety and novelty of the effects resulting from it. Of all this Rossini has made ample use in his works; and here again, as in other matters, he has been so uncontrolled and lavish, that the frequency of the employment has become habit, and the habit has produced a strong feature of mannerism. The novelty is not in the thing itself, for others have *occasionally* done the like; but Rossini has, as it were, usurped the right of unsparingly decking out all his melodies with appoggiaturas of all kinds and lengths.

Among various other Rossinian practices which, according to the foregoing remark, are found to be so frequent and habitual with him as to constitute what is termed mannerism, we may also number the fondness of closing his periods by modulating from the major tonic to the minor mood of the lesser third *below*, or of the great third *above* such major tonic; *i. e.* if the period be in C major, it will be made to close either in A minor, or E minor. This species of modulation, especially that to the minor third below, was common enough long before Rossini, but both are of such constant occurrence in his melodies, that the chances would probably be in favour of a wager, which maintained that any piece of Rossini, picked at random from his compositions, shall exhibit one or the other of these minor transitions in the very motivo. In this, as in other features, some of which we have just enumerated, a very considerable portion of his compositions appears to be matter of routine, fashioned in the same mould, with an occasional sprinkling of adventitious and trifling change, as to form and figure.

We deem it unnecessary to extend these observations: they show sufficiently, we think, that Rossini is a mannerist in the full sense of the term. Our next object will be to consider a much more serious charge brought against him by his adversaries, *viz.* that of being a *plagiarist*. If the repetition and production of an author's own ideas came under the denomination of plagiarism, Rossini must at once plead guilty; but, as the term is generally considered to apply exclusively to the appropriation of the thoughts or works of *another*, the

question appears to be, how far Rossini has made free with the property of others.

The question of plagiarism in music is too nice and uncertain in its limits to admit of a full enquiry in this place: it seems to be a question of degree. If the adoption of *one* bar of music, to be found in other works, constituted plagiarism, we know of no composer, not excepting Handel, Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven, who could be exculpated from the charge; and, after all, it would remain to be ascertained who was the first that made use of the questionable bar. There is, we believe, an opinion current among the profession, that the appropriation of no less than *four* bars constitutes actionable piracy. If so, Rossini has no cause to fear the arm of the law. We do not remember an instance of his introducing four bars, *tali quali*, from the works of a brother bard. But, if he be not amenable to the charge of legal piracy, there is such a thing as moral, constructive plagiarism, plagiarism in disguise. And in this respect Rossini, we fear, stands but an indifferent chance. He has largely borrowed in every quarter. Besides resorting to the national airs of Italy, he has, to a great extent, availed himself of the ideas of Generali and Cimarosa, and other Italian authors; and the German composers, Haydn, Krommer, Mozart, &c. have supplied materials for his scores. We have not room for a catalogue of these numerous Rossinian loans, the existence of many of which, we believe, is not disputed even by himself. Among the appropriations from Cimarosa, those which occur in "*La Cenerentola*" are perhaps the most conspicuous. From Haydn the substance of "*Zitti, zitti*," in the "*Barbiere di Siviglia*," has been borrowed: the opening movement in "*Mose*" has its source in a quartett of Krommer's; Mozart has furnished various models of harmonic progressions; and, among others, the strains of the Ghost of Ninus in "*Semiramide*," are mere imitations of quite similar harmonies in "*Don Giovanni*;" in "*Semiramide*," too, we have new versions of the German air, "*Life let us cherish*," of an Italian monferrina, well known in England under the title of "*Row, Gondoliers*," &c. &c.

These appropriations, we admit, are not always obvious; because Rossini, as has already been remarked, takes good care, like other professional appropriators, not to expose them in their primitive form. They are first thrown into the crucible of Rossinian mannerism, from which they come out so changed in outward shape, that the rightful owners scarcely know them again, and much less can establish a title to their own metamorphosed property. The legitimate proprietors are much in the same situation as Mrs. N—, the widow of an English merchant residing at Naples some thirty years ago. Mrs. N—, being compelled to undertake a journey to England, at an inclement season of the year, availed herself of the kind offer of a friend, a Neapolitan lady, the mother of a family, to leave her only child with her, a beautiful boy of six or seven years, whose open countenance, large blue eyes, and curly flaxen locks, set off by a light becoming skeleton dress, open frill, &c. had often attracted the favourable notice of Lady Hamilton. On Mrs. N—'s return, after an absence of some months, she alighted at the Signora's. Little Charles flew up to his mother's arms, who at first did not know him; but, on recognizing her offspring, she burst into a flood of tears. Charley's exterior had undergone an infinity of improvements under the fostering hand of the Signora. Instead of the light nankeen trowsers, he wore a miniature pair of tight-knees with paste buckles, and his little foot was set off to great advantage by a pair of Cordovan shoes, nearly hidden by another pair of paste buckles. To make up, as it were, for the procrustean curtailment of the inexpressibles, Charley's neat little blue jacket had given way to a regular coat with skirts dangling down to the heels; the open frill had been discarded in favour of a tight black cravat, presenting a fine large bow in front, edged with narrow black lace; the auburn locks, well frizzed, pomatumed, and powdered, had been extended on each side like the wings of Mercury, and tastefully tied up behind into a little pigtail.—A pair of scissors, asked for on the spot from the very foster-mother, enabled the afflicted parent, in a great measure, to dis-Haniltonize the exterior of the child, whose tears evinced the grief he felt at the loss of his fine trappings.

If "*God save the King*," or, "*The Dashing White Sergeant*," were thrown into the Rossinian *casserole*, the odds are, that most people would not know them again; nay, that their hearts would leap with delight at the fascinating novelty, and their hands clap for an encore. We have before now tried our hand at Rossinianizing the subjects of hackneyed tunes, and the result has proved quite amusing; if some of our musical readers will make a similar experiment, they will understand, better than all our observations can convey, the effect and mystery of Rossinian mannerism.

When a man is found on the one hand to appropriate to himself so freely and frequently the thoughts of others, and, on the other, to resort so constantly to a repetition of his own ideas, under every sort of varied form and disguise, we are, however reluctantly, compelled to qualify our opinions as to his originality and the store of his inventive faculty. We are warranted in concluding, either that he must be gifted with the latter in a degree by no means unlimited, or that pressure of time, or indolence, may have often induced him to draw less on the resources of his own mind, than we have a right to expect from true genius and exalted and independent feelings. In Rossini, both causes have often, perhaps, operated conjointly. Pressure of time, however, must be left out of consideration as regards the few works he has produced during the last four or five years of his easy and snug engagement in Paris; while, on the other hand, its effect during an earlier period of his career, when want of sufficient leisure could alone have existed, seems to have been so little prejudicial to his productions, that some of those are precisely found to be the most original, and certainly the most likely to perpetuate his fame.

Indolence, no doubt, has but too often impeded the full display of Rossini's genius; but, for ourselves, we are inclined to suspect that the genius and inventive faculties of Rossini—however fully and undeniably their existence is proved in his works—have been meted out to him by nature within measured limits, by no means inexhaustible; and, if we are to form an opinion from his later works, we think we should be justified in entertaining the apprehension that his mind is approaching the limits set by nature. His latest operas,—viz. "*Zelmira*," "*Semiramide*," "*Le Siege de Cerinthe*," "*Le Comte Ory*," and "*Guillaume Tell*," appear to us to lead to this conclusion. Notwithstanding that the two first-named, and more particularly "*Semiramide*," must ever be considered as works of a very superior order, they yet evince rather a high degree of art, science, and intimate knowledge of dramatic effect, than that genial inspiration which is the source of original and fascinating melody. "*Le Siege de Cerinthe*," a *rifacimento* as it is of his unsuccessful "*Maometto Secondo*," has met with no better reception than its prototype; and "*Le Comte Ory*," another made-up piece from "*Le Voyage a Rheims*," is altogether an insignificant production, with the exception of one or two good choruses; and failed, deservedly, on its first representation at the King's Theatre.

"*Guillaume Tell*" is the most recent opera of Rossini, and was brought out at Paris last summer only. As the poem is far more important than that of "*Le Comte Ory*," and Rossini was known to have devoted much time to its composition, we felt, along with the majority of the musical public, an intense curiosity to ascertain the value of its music. But, with the exception of the overture, recently played at the City Amateur Concert, no part of it has as yet been publicly performed in England; and as it is only very lately* that we have had an opportunity of examining a mere pianoforte arrangement with the vocal parts, the opinion we have been able to form may be liable to modification; and, such as it is, we can only state it briefly and generally, as this is not the place for entering upon a regular criticism. Although the music be very voluminous, "*Guillaume Tell*" appears to us more in the light of a musical melodrama than a regular opera. A considerable part of the action is carried on with the aid of dramatic music; there are many long recitatives; and an unusual number of choruses

constitute a principal portion of the opera. The whole seems to bear the stamp of careful elaboration and assiduity; is indisputably not only the best French opera from the pen of Rossini, but a work which proclaims the hand of a great master in his art, and which presents occasional gleams of the Promethian spark, as regards originality of melodic invention. The latter, however, are not so frequent, and the reminiscences and repetitions of earlier ideas not so rare, as to lull our fears concerning the wane of the flame which cheered and vivified some of Rossini's earlier productions. Art and science seem to us to predominate largely over invention; and they have not been spared in the construction of the great mass of the choruses, some of which are masterly. Rossini's style seems to have undergone a change on the borders of the Seine, not for the better, we think. It is as if the pomegranate or myrtle had been grafted upon the northern hawthorn or wild cherry, and the blossoms presented a hybrid approximation between the alien species. The music could scarcely fail to please the Parisian public; but we would hardly advise M. Laporte to transplant it to the King's Theatre, and we are convinced it would never succeed on any stage in Italy.

In thus unreservedly expressing our opinion, we feel in candour called upon to add one remark. It is, perhaps, not allowing fair play to Rossini, to judge decisively of the continuance or diminution of his inventive powers by the works which he has produced in France, upon French texts. The comparison would be more perfect if he were now to write an opera to an Italian libretto; and we are not without hopes that his present stay in Italy, upon a twelvemonth's leave of absence, may be the means of accomplishing the object we allude to.

(To be continued.)

* Subsequently to the first portion of this paper being sent to press,